

Hearts, flowers mark Valentine's Day

By Linda Laws
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Today is a day for hearts, flowers, messages to your sweetheart or special friends, and romantic dinners. Valentine's Day has been special for a very long time – actually since Roman times. One story from the time tells of a priest named Valentine who lived in Rome during Emperor Claudius II's reign. The emperor had decreed that his Roman soldiers should not marry or become engaged, as he believed that if they were, the soldiers would be reluctant to go away to fight for their country. Valentine defied the Emperor's decree and secretly married many young couples. For this act of defiance, Valentine was arrested, imprisoned and lost his life.

Victorian times

Throughout the years, the popularity of Valentine's Day has waxed and waned, but the Victorians were particularly romantic. The Victorians popularised the sending of cards to their lovers. These early cards were exquisite, handmade affairs incorporating little paintings of hearts, flowers and birds together with a short verse composed by the sender. The introduction of the penny post in 1840 brought with it commercially printed and decorated cards.

From 1901, when Queen Victoria died, to the 1930s, St. Valentine's Day fell from favour, but has been popular again for the past 60 years or so.

The romance of motoring

Shell garages, one of the world's biggest providers of petrol, had the novel idea of sending their lady customers a valentine card. The first card was produced in 1938 and sent to women who had accounts with the garage. Buying petrol on "tick" and paying at the end of the month was common practice in the

pre-plastic period. The first card spelt out the sender's identity in the first letters of each line of its verse:

Stop, fair motorist divine
Here am I, your Valentine
Ever ready you to serve
Look – you're down to your reserve
Let me help and all is well

Old custom of name drawing

This ritual was popular in other countries as well as in the United Kingdom, and probably dates from Roman times when the festival of Lupercalia was celebrated Feb. 15. The protector of herds and crops, the god Lupercus, was asked to keep the peoples' flocks and animals healthy and fertile.

Names of girls were put into a vessel. An equal number of boys would each pick out a name and the couple would be paired for events around the festival of Lupercalia.

In Scotland, the names used to be drawn



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three times, the names being returned to the vessel after the first and second drawing. If anyone drew the same name three times, it was looked upon as being a certain omen for marriage. It was also usual for the name to be carried to the sweetheart's house, where a small gift of an apple or other trinket would be exchanged for it.

Association with flowers

Among the flowers associated with Valentine's Day is the pansy, known as the emblem of love and kind thoughts – it's common name is heartsease. The forget-me-not means friendship. St. Valentine's Day is often heralded in with flakes of snow, strong winds and icy air, but if there is even a little sunshine, then thecelandines and snowdrops will peep their heads out from under hedgerows.

Tradition at Somerleyton Hall

The current Lord and Lady Somerleyton will welcome children from the village school to their impressive home. The children will sing and play music for them and in return will receive an iced bun and a newly minted twopenny piece.

The children will then be given the afternoon off school to play in the maze in the grounds of the hall. This local tradition started more than 150 years ago.

Somerleyton Hall is an early Victorian mansion built around a Tudor and Jacobean shell which is open to the public between Easter and September.

